

Daughters of the Digital Empire

Book One of
Moonlight Hearts

By D.D. Ward

And Margaret Lovelace

Content Warnings

Sexual content

- 0 none.
- 1 kissing and romance
- 2 heavy petting, implied sex
- 4 explicit sexual content
- 5 non consensual content

Violent content

- 0 none.

- 1 action with no death seen
- 2 violence with no blood or gore
- 4 extreme violence, explicit gore
- 5 sexual assault

List of Trigger Warnings

Sexual assault

Abuse ✓

Child abuse/pedophilia/incest

Animal cruelty or animal death

Self-harm and suicide ✓

Eating disorders, body hatred, and fat phobia

Violence ✓

Pornographic content

Kidnapping and abduction ✓

Death or dying ✓

Pregnancy/childbirth

Miscarriages/abortion

Blood ✓

Mental illness

Ableism

Racism and racial slurs

Sexism and misogyny ✓

Classism ✓

Hateful language directed at religious groups

Transphobia and trans misogyny

Homophobia and heterosexism

Swears or curses ✓

Nudity ✓

Murder ✓

Torture

Chapter 4: The Suitors

I made my way through the halls of castle Octavian. My Uncle had the hall decorated in gold and red, the colors of House Octavian. Shields hung adorned with red and gold counterchanged hunting dogs. This was the symbol of the House. The carpet was a rich crimson. The air smelled of a riot of perfumes, body odor, alcohol, and talc. People were wandering towards the great hall. I caught snippets of conversation as I moved through the crowd.

"I invoked my precognition gift on this party. But all I could see was that somebody gets slapped."

"The alchemist delivered your little blue pills this morning, so you'd better not eat too much. I expect you to be ready for the after party!"

"I made an offering to the Quintuple Lords of Misfortune. We should have protection against bad luck in this venture."

"Did you hear about the attack last night? Something mauled a blacksmith at his forge last night, before dawn. The guards suspect either a werewolf or a barghest. But last night wasn't a full moon, so it would have to have been a hereditary werewolf."

"I heard that Duke Leon's ship, the Verity, saw action yesterday. They chased a suspected smuggling vessel, but the vessel escaped using a fog potion."

"Helen, we need more canape in the grand hall. Get some from the kitchen."

I listened with interest. Moonlight Hearts took place in a fantasy world. But except for alchemy and werewolves, the fantasy had seemed like window dressing. But now, I lived in this world. And understanding how the magic and the supernatural worked would be important. It would matter how it affected my day to day. Lynn had described the setting as low magic or low fantasy. I wasn't sure I agreed.

I'd listened to a conversation about the alchemical version of Viagra. I'd heard somebody describe a fantasy smoke grenade. That sounded pretty high fantasy to me. Werewolves skirted the line in my mind. And offerings to gods or what not seemed pretty normal for low fantasy.

I reached the top of the grand staircase and stopped. What was I going to do? Trapped in a video game, what could I do? I'd decided to be the best friend. But what did that mean? To me it meant supporting the heroine and helping her get what she wanted. Whatever that was. So what was I going to do? I decided that I'd best start by getting to know the suitors, that was the purpose of the game after all, marrying a suitor. I knew the four of them well

enough. But unlike when I played the game, now I had to actually interact with them, not simply select canned responses provided by the game's writers. That would be a challenge. So that was my goal for the moment, meet the suitors and get a sense of them as people and not game assets.

I paused to look down on the great hall. The walls were the color of heavy cream. Wall hangings in gold and red accented the cream color. The families of House Octavian lived on the Castle estate. My uncle, Baron Giles, was lord of the house. Membership in the house granted people benefits. It granted a place in Castle Octavian and the surrounding manor. I looked out over the assembled people. I could see my father, Lord Jean Octavian, speaking with my mother, Lady Evelyn. I could also see the suitors for the game. They stood talking with each other, amidst the families.

Prince Wulfric had his hand on a court sword as they spoke. He was the only noble wearing a weapon, I noticed. He wore black riding boots of some sort, although I couldn't see details at this distance. He wore a ring on his right pinky, which I suspected was a signet ring. He was attractive if you liked violent bad boys. He wore a goatee and kept his long dark hair hanging loose. He wore a monocle, despite being far too young to pull off the effect. He grinned like a predator and leaned forward like a vulture. But he had the mass of a bodybuilder and filled out his breeches and tailcoat. Men weren't my thing, but I could tell when one was good looking. Lynn would have called him a lumbersexual.

Beside the prince stood a thin muscular man in a Hyperborean army dress uniform. Definitely not a noble, the second man wore a saber at his hip. He had a drooping handlebar mustache. He had shaved his skull completely bald, exposing tattoos on his temples. He wasn't one of the suitors. I didn't recognize him.

Duke Leon Delmar stood a full head above the others. His skin had acquired a deep tan and he wore his blonde hair long and tied back in a braid. He wore the blue uniform of the Yssian Navy and black riding boots. He also wore a ring on his pinky, and I noticed stud earrings with some sort of clear gem mounted. I noted a startling number of awards on the uniform. And I found myself wondering if the duke had earned those medals. As a member of the royal family, he might have awarded them to himself. He looked like a gymnast who worked as a lifeguard. And his features were those of a Greek God.

Count Vincent Metternich was the shortest of the men. From this distance, I guessed he was shorter than I was. I thought he was five

foot ten. He was a dark-skinned man, with black curly hair kept long in beach waves. He wore a black Spencer jacket. He wore this rather than the traditional tailcoat of the Agarthan nobility. He paired the Spencer jacket with white trousers. He wore black leather hunting boots that fit under the trousers. He wore silver earrings that were either stud or huggie style. Vincent was the closest the game came to a character who was average in appearance. And even here, the Count was still attractive, with an aquiline nose and high cheekbones.

Countess Fiona Myrddhin stood a little shorter than Amy. I guessed her height to be between five foot and five foot three. She wore a lapis lazuli blue sleeveless gown with a pair of cool pink four-inch stiletto sandals. The gown had a dramatic plunging neckline. She wore a matching cool pink sash across her hip, bound with a gold cylindrical ornament. I stared. I knew what Fiona Myrddhin looked like, but now I was seeing her in person. Her father was Yssian nobility, but her mother was Scythian royalty. Her Scythian heritage was clear on her darker skin and black hair. She wore cool pink lipstick and dark purple smokey eyeshadow. Her skin was beautiful, and her décolletage was stunning. Her body was a symphony of swooping arcs and curves. She was stunning with her graceful neck and shoulders. From the scandalous low neckline on her dress down to hips on display due to her form fitting dress. She wore a gold choker necklace and white opera gloves which accented the dress.

"You're staring," Somebody whispered behind me. I turned to see Amy walk past me down the staircase with a tray of drinks. I blushed again and shook my head. This is what happens in a world populated by characters instead of real people. Everyone here was attractive or- more often- beautiful. That's what game designers like. I knew from experience watching the game. The only plain or ugly people were either villains or comic relief. This upset me, but it was also useful. For instance: Mildred, my mother's personal maid looked like a bulldog sucking on a lemon. Mildred was the oldest and most senior of the maids. She was not in charge on paper. But in practice, she was in charge of the female staff in Castle Octavian. I watched her smack the back of Amy's head, and gritted my teeth as Amy flinched. I'd reprimand Mildred, but it would do no good. As my mother's private maid, she answered to mother first. And mother outranked me. I was higher in the line of succession, but she was still my mother. Or rather, she was still the rival's mother. I saw the rival's two sisters. They were the nice ones: Catherine and

Katarina. I was the evil stepsister in this story, even though I was a cousin. I would hesitate before calling them smart. In the game they were walking talking valley girl stereotypes. But they provided useful gossip to the heroine. Catherine wore a sapphire blue mermaid tail gown with terrifying pump heels. She had her strawberry blonde hair in a perm that screamed to the eighties. Katarina wore a cranberry red A-line evening gown. He had paired that with white sling-back heels as tall as her sisters. Both stood at least five foot nine inches, with the heels they cleared six feet. The heroine wasn't here yet. Which I guess made sense. In the game all the main characters were present when the player arrived at this scene. I began descending the staircase. I took my time and ran over what I knew about each of the suitors. The two big fish of the lot were Prince Wulfric and Duke Leon.

Wulfric was the eldest son of King Hardrada of Hyperborea and first in line for the throne. He was infamous among the nobility of the region for being a sadist and a bully. He'd been engaged once already, to an Agarthan duchess, but she had died in a carriage accident. People had whispered about the accident being a lie to cover up the prince's misdeeds. People whispered that he liked to strike servants and commoners on a whim. People said he had killed five nobles in duels.

Leon was a duke, and younger brother by fifteen years to the current King of Ys: Godwin Delmar III. Like Prince Wulfric, he was royalty. Unlike Wulfric, his power outside his own duchy counted for very little. Ys was a constitutional monarchy, administered by the house of lords. The King was a figurehead. The dukes ruled through the house of lords. Within their own duchy, a duke's power was absolute. Outside it, they had little more than their wealth. But Leon was also commander of the Royal Navy. And he was duke of the duchy where our castle resided. So that would weigh on the calculations. By all accounts he was also a sweet guy. And I knew from watching Lynn, that Leon was the nicest of the four by a wide margin.

Vincent was a count and Fiona was a countess, making them equal in status. Vincent being a foreign noble meant that he was useful for alliance building. The heroine's father was a baron, lower rank than a prince or duke, but higher than a count or countess. But taking Vincent for an alliance with Agarthia held strong attraction. Agarthia was the only nation in the region able to match the strength of Hyperborea. Fiona's big selling feature, aside from being stunning, was that her county capital. Myrddhin City was the busiest port in

the Boro Sea. Ships from Hyperborea resupplied in the port of Myrddhin City. They then headed south to Agarthā. And Agarthan ships did likewise as they sailed north to Hyperborea.

So, to recap, Wulfric had the highest position in the aristocracy but was an abusive monster. Leon was royalty in a kingdom where royalty didn't matter much, but ruled the region where we actually lived. Vincent would allow for an alliance with a foreign nation and had the advantage of not being Wulfric. And Fiona controlled the richest port city in the region, but was otherwise small fry.

I reached the floor and considered my options.

If I was going to be honest with myself, the idea of trying to court Fiona appealed to me a lot. She was a noble and I was, now, a noble. The match was acceptable, and might be the only way I could escape marrying a man. And since I might be stuck here for who knows how long, I didn't want a life trapped in a living hell. Fiona was something of an ice queen in the game. She seemed to have trouble talking to people. She could be blunt and hurt people without realizing she had. And I wasn't sure that I had the social skills to romance her in unscripted real life. Listen to me. Real life? This?

What was I going to do? Well, first things first, I was going to meet the suitors. Then I was going to become my new cousin's best friend. I would support her quest for whichever suitor she wanted. I would help her get her dream and stop the game from killing me in the process. Unless she wanted Fiona. Maybe. I didn't know yet.